

Sexualizing the Orient

Naji Oueijan

Several scholars, including myself (Behdid, Kabbani, Lowe, Oueijan, Said), have argued that the nineteenth-century Orient, in several ways, became the object of Western curiosity and had a major influence on the development of Romantic culture. "What then included Asia Minor, Arabia, and Persia ... could satisfy the Western craving for a world seductively attractive and reflective of the highly imaginative and colorful world of (the Orient)" (Oueijan, *Image*, 95). In addition to images of Eastern men as the sensualist lords of harems and the masters of the aura of female sexuality, images of Eastern females as fairies of sensuality and seduction spiced the literary and artistic works of those nineteenth-century literary figures and artists who visited the East and who contributed to the sexualization of the Orient. While to some Western travelers the Orient was the land of light and ancient civilizations and cultures, to others it was an exotic Other and the terrain of sexual fantasies and desires. By concentrating on the infatuation of certain British and French Romantic

artists with the seductive images of the Orient, we may gain new insight into how the sensational images of the East invaded Romantic fantasies and to shed new light on aspects of this discourse of images as escapes from Western tradition, from sexual inhibition, and from previous non-Romanticized views of sexualization. And, by mapping some of the origins of this image locus, we may ultimately find the ways in which Romanticism contributed to the masculinization and/or feminization of the East and, in both ways, its sexualization.

Much has been written recently about the Western nineteenth-century projection of the Orient as the terrain of masculine lust and feminine seduction. A leading modern critic in this regard is Edward Said who argues that Romantic orientalism, and especially French Orientalism, perceived the Orient as a "living tableau of queerness" (103). The Romantics, he confirms, looked at the Orientals as "living in a state of Oriental despotism and sensuality" (102). Said places Nerval, who considered the Orient "le pays des rêves et de l'illusion", and Flaubert, who deemed the sensual Orient an occasion for musing unbounded sexuality, in that "community of thought and feeling described by Mario Praz in *The Romantic Agony*, a community for which the imagery of the exotic places, the cultivation of sadomasochistic tastes (what Praz calls *algolagnia*), a fascination with the macabre, with the notion of Fatal woman, with secrecy and occultism" (180). For Said the sexualization of the East has operated as an ideological prop for Western imperialistic desires. Along the same lines of thought, Linda Nochlin discusses the sexulaity of the Oriental matter in Romantic art as a tool of Western imperialism. To her Western visions of the cruel, lustful, sexual, and seductive Other—the Oriental Other—are necessary for the subjugation and control of it (79). Eric Meyer adopts a similar view when he asserts that Byron's Oriental tales are "fixated on the Oriental harem and on the figure of the veiled Eastern girl who stands as a synecdoche for the colonial other ... to assert authorial hegemony over the feminized East and bring it under the regulation of the masculine West" (659–660). Basing his views on Michael Foucault's perceptions of power and sexuality, Meyer assumes that political power renders the West masculine and weakness renders the East feminine (684). A more persuasive discussion, however, is presented by Lisa Lowe who claims that for French Romantics "the associations of Orientalism with Romanticism are not coincidental, for the two situations of desire—the occidental fascination with the Orient and the male lover's passion for his

female beloved—are structurally similar. Both depend on a structure that locates an Other—as woman, as oriental scene—as inaccessible, different, beyond” (2). “During the nineteenth-century,” Lowe confirms, “the Orient is frequently represented as a female figure, and the narratives of Occident and Orient are figured in the rhetorical framework of the romantic quest; the female Orient is a metonymical reduction of what is different from and desired by the masculine European subject” (*Nationalism and Exoticism*, 214). Lowe puts aside imperialistic discourse in favor of the Romantic passionate quest for sensual satisfaction and fulfillment beyond conventional terrains. This argument joins with Bryan S. Turner’s, who writes that the “East appears in Western imagination as the forbidden Other, which is simultaneously repulsive, seductive and attractive. Like the veil, the East is both secluded and inviting. From the eighteenth century, the Orient has existed within a literary and visual tradition which is both romantic and fantastic” (1). Lowe’s and Turner’s views make good use of Tzvetan Todorov’s discussion of exoticism as “everything that is other,” and as synonymous with “alterity” and “diversity” (325 and 329). He explains: “... we cherish the remote because of its remoteness” (265). In this respect, he links Romanticism to exoticism since “alterity,” “mobility,” “diversity,” “remoteness,” and “primitiveness” compose the nucleus of Romantic theory.

However, the most appropriate formula supporting the basic goal of this paper comes in Todorov’s discussion of Pierre Loti’s exoticism; he points out that in works such as *Aziyadé*, *Rarahu*, and *Madame Chrysanthème*, the French writer invents a novelistic formula whereby “a European visits a non-European country, and a man has an erotic relation with a woman”; this woman, however, must be foreign because whatever is foreign must be exotic and, consequently, erotic (314). This formula is essential for understanding the real implied reasons for the sexualization of not only the Orient but of also any Other. For Loti, who uses his pseudonym “Loti”¹ for the major male character of his three narratives, this formula works under two conditions: first, the relation between Self and Other must be part of an adventurous disposition; and second, the affair must *start* and *end* outside the terrain of Self’s traditional cultural confinements. In *Aziyadé*, *Rarahu*, and *Madame Chrysanthème*, Loti uses Turkey, Tahiti, and Japan as his settings—all of which he reduces to their women; in his narratives, foreign men are insignificant as they do not contribute to enhancing the sense of adventure, exoticism, and eroticism,

which seems to be excited the moment his feet touch Turkish, Tahitian, or Japanese lands, and *not* after he meets their native women. Traversing a foreign land is by itself an adventurous act since it begins with invading the privacy of an Other. It also liberates Self and sets its imagination on a quest of self-fulfillment for intense desires and impressions. A new country becomes a new platform where sensual and erotic opportunities are not only accessible but are also devoid of the national and traditional critical gaze. Interesting enough is Loti's eagerness to remove his European shoes—to remove his conventional Western customs—inside the houses of the Turks, Tahitians, and Japanese, as the custom of these countries dictate. That is to say, on foreign soil Loti is capable of dropping the mask concealing Self, a necessary step for fulfilling his primitive sensual desires and dreams. He writes from England to a Turkish friend, "Sometimes I feel that yours is my proper dress, and that it is only now that I am really in disguise" (127). However, the moment Self departs from foreign lands the adventure ends, and so do the sensual and even emotional affairs with exotic women. And indeed, Loti's narratives end when his ship leaves foreign harbors. This brings us to the second condition: the sensual, erotic affair becomes more inviting not only because it lies outside the native national and cultural terrain of Self but also because the sensual seduction of an Other, a female other, is conditioned by the belief on the part of Self that this Other is different, controllable, and dispensable. Non-European females are exotic and erotic because, under the gaze of the European masculine eye, they are permissible and submissive; accordingly, they are desired. Aziyadé, Loti tells us, is an expert in the language of the eyes or the language of silence, which men prefer in a woman (62). She does not speak Loti's native language which renders her more controllable than European females. He writes that she represents "Oriental charm" (62) and the "perfumes of the East" (24); thus, via her, her country is feminized. When Aziyadé surrenders to him her country does as well, and when it is time for Loti's ship to leave, it is time to stop all fantasies and, consequently, to stop the exotic adventure. After his departure, intoxication for Loti becomes an amusing memory; however, for his exotic female lovers, it becomes a verdict of desolation and probable death. Abandoned by Loti, Aziyadé dies in isolation after her husband discovers the affair. The same thing happens in *Rarahu* or *The Marriage of Loti* when Loti starts an affair with a charming Tahitian country girl. And although he knows she is destined to live in isolation, to become a

prostitute, and to die after he abandons her, he pursues his sensual indulgence. For him this renders the affair more exotic. He writes: "That was perhaps for me an additional charm, the charm of those who are going to die" (116). "The infatuation with the incomprehensible foreigner and the final abandonment—translate perfectly the ambivalence of Loti's exoticism," notes Todorov (318). But what Todorov misses is that, in Loti's narratives, the excessive desire on the part of Self to invade and distort, and even to destroy, the privacy of the different Other becomes an obsession which reduces not only Other to a sexual object but also Self to its most destructive, primitive, and uncivil sensual states. The *True Self* is exposed; and the burden of this dilemma, Self must carry and suffer from. Thus, Loti returns to Turkey, searches for Aziyadé, learns that she is already dead, joins the Turkish army and dies there. His search for the exotic and seductive hid his search for his real sensual impulses, for his *True Self*. In this sense, his sexualization of Other condemns his own untamed and uncivil sexuality, a reflection of the politics of an inhibited Self.

The excessive desire on the part of Self to invade the privacy of the different Other becomes an obsession whether this Other is Oriental, Tahitian, American, or Far Eastern. And although all art and literature may in some respects be directly or indirectly influenced by the politics of Self, the Romantics and other nineteenth-century artists and literary figures cannot be categorized as propagandists as they were particularly concerned with the experience of a new colorful, warm, and distant Other, one that might provide them with innovative themes and modes of expression. They were also more fired than ever before by a desire to liberate Self from ages of traditional confinements. The exotic Orient, which at the time was accessible, represented this Other. And the masculinization or feminization of the Orient, Alan Richardson emphasizes, gave the Romantics, especially Lord Byron, the opportunity to critique Self. "The conjunction of woman and Orient," he argues, "can also provide, however, the locus for a critique of Western patriarchy through its reflection in the distorting mirror of the East" (177). Richardson asserts that the Western "contacts with Asian cultures could also serve to decode or defamiliarize, as in the works of Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Goldsmith, Europe's collective daydream of itself" (175). More important is Richardson's belief that "It has become common in 'post-structuralist' cultural theory to view Western patriarchal tradition in terms of its constructions of 'the Other,' which can be manifested as women (as, for example, in Irigaray) or as the

Orient (as in Said). Indeed, the critique of what Spanos summarizes as the 'binary logic of Western metaphysical tradition' which 'assimilates and circumscribes the Other to the central proper self of Capitalistic man' seems increasingly to function, somewhat as did the Great Chain of Being for an earlier critical generation, as the dominant cultural model in literary studies" (179). Richardson is capable of pinpointing the dilemma of Western superficial and wishful erotic desires of an Otherness in the form of a female; an Otherness made exotic, seductive, and erotic only to exploit it as a mirror reflecting real Self. The Romantics, to Richardson, seem to be more engaged with the imperialism of the imagination, the "phallic imperialism" of the West, than with the political imperialism of dominance.

But images of the cruel and lustful Orient were not invented in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; they had spread in the West ever since the rise of Islam in the East. As far back as 640 AD, the author of a book entitled, *Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati* ("The Teaching of Jacob the Newly-baptized"), accused the followers of Muhammad "of blood and violence.... [and] of self-indulgence and sexual licence"; this early image, Richard Fletcher confirms, "has proved quite remarkably longlasting" (158). And long-lasting it was, because from the Muslim occupation of Jerusalem (638 AD) to the Crusaders conquest of the Holy City (1099) this rather propagandist image of Eastern life prevailed in Western minds. C. Merdith Jones poses an illuminating discussion of the medieval representation of the Orientals, called the Saracens then; they "are evil people, they spend their lives in hating and mocking at Christ and in destroying His churches. They are the children of the author of all evil, the Devil" and they have physical monstrosities (204–205). Besides several other historians and theologians, Bede, Matthew Paris, and Nicolas Trivet popularized such exaggerated images at a time when Frederick II, the last of the Norman rulers, was believed to have his own harem where he held several Arab females as concubines (Daniel 166), and when some Western monks in the Spanish city Roda used to enslave and have sexual affairs with Muslim young women after their families abandoned them for illicit sex (Fletcher 115). Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale," based on the Anglo-Norman *Chronicle* of Nicolas Trivet, shows the Orient as a land of hostility and portrays the Muslims as the agents of the devil. To medieval thought, which often associated cruelty with physical fetish, the Muslims were cruel, thus lustful people. Unfortunately,

this image continued to evolve during the following ages as Muslim power and expansion threatened the Christian West. Louis Wann claims that most Elizabethan dramatists represented the Orientals, especially the males, as “barbarous and distinctively lustful.... Their morals are loose, and their monarchs are apt to be tyrannical” (181). Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Phillip Massinger’s *The Renegado*, Thomas Kyd’s *Soliman and Perseda*, Fulke Greville’s *Mustapha*, Thomas Goffe’s *The Raging Turk*, and especially Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great I and II* exhibited highly cruel and seductive images of Orientals and their rulers. These images of the Oriental Other were tuned up with an obsessive phobia of a growing Muslim power in the mid-seventeenth century; this emerging power represented a different dogma tolerating polygamy and promising its believers a sensual paradise. These beliefs incited Western dreams and fantasies after the crumbling of Ottoman power late in the nineteenth century. They were then fixed after Napoleon invaded Egypt early in the nineteenth-century during which Western phobia turned into a passionate desire to invade the most secretive and private realms of this once powerful Other. In Egypt, Napoleon’s affairs with Oriental women were quite influential in directing the Western gaze towards the feminized East. André Castelot, Napoleon’s biographer, confirms the emperor’s wish to have his own harem to satisfy his sexual desires. Napoleon had several sexual affairs with Egyptian females but the most ignoble was with a sixteen-year-old beauty who was later prosecuted by the Egyptian authorities after the emperor satisfied his lust and left her with no protection whatsoever (112). Napoleon’s officers and soldiers were neither less brutal nor less desirous than their leader in their quest for the sensual experience or the possession of the Oriental female.

Another reason for the penetration of the erotic character of the East was the translation and wide reception of the *Arabian Nights’ Entertainment* early in the eighteenth century.² The popularity of these tales was unprecedented and encouraged other translations of the *Turkish Tales* (1707) and the *Persian Tales, or a Thousand and One Days* (1710–1712). These and other Oriental tales³ stirred the fancy and imagination of Western readers because they exhibited an East highly colorful and charming as well as enormously cruel and sensual. The image of the brutal and lustful Sultan who marries a new wife every day and kills her the following morning for fear of her betrayal and the portrayal of Scheherazade, the charming and seductive female narrator of the *Arabian*

Nights, tantalized the West. Both characters, besides several others, invaded the fancy and dreams of Western readers. "Whether enjoyed as an imaginary retreat or as an escape from despondency and ennui into an imaginary Orient the *Nights* continued to touch the daemonic strain in the romantic imagination, evoking diverse feelings of ecstasy, delight and relaxation" (Ali 87). The famous British traveler and scholar Richard Burton thought that the tales "arouse strange longings and indescribable desires; their marvelous imaginativeness produces an insensible brightening of the mind and an increase of fancypower, making one dream that behind them lies the new and unseen, the strange and unexpected" (Qtd. Ali, 87). Burton saw in tales of the orient a world where Romantic artists and literary figures could satisfy their innermost desires and fantasies. And indeed, this work, which presents the violent passions of Oriental men and the submissive passivity of beautiful, veiled Oriental women, fixed the image of the Orient as the aura of rich sensuality and alluring seduction.

A third factor that contributed enormously to the sexualization of the Orient was eighteenth and nineteenth century travel writing. Western travelers to the East, especially the French, sought the East for its remoteness, exoticism, and mystery; some tried to invade and uncover the most private aspects of Oriental life, space, and time and to carry their impressions to Western terrains. Those who did so were aided by the Romantic fantasy of escape and liberation, the quest for self discovery and relocation. Besides, Romantic spiritual and spatial mobility prompted a passionate yearning for the actual experience of difference and it is this yearning that encouraged several Romantic artists and literary figures to bear the hardships of travel. They believed the Orient was a perfect blend of the remote, the mysterious, and the illusionary. And as mentioned above, it was not only available, accessible, and exotic but it promised the fulfillment of wishes. These characteristics constituted major reasons to travel to the Orient for nineteenth-century artists and literary figures, who, unlike diplomats, scientists, tradesmen, and tourists (who reduced their experiences into visual objectification of the different Other or "the conversion of a visual experience into spectacle"), turned visual proximity into a personal experience, enjoyed via a genuine participation in the most private Oriental life or via the illusion of integration. Their experiences, at times, turned into a positive fascination with this Otherness, but quite frequently this fascination reflected illusions of sensual discharge.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was one who genuinely participated in Oriental life to the point of fascination. As wife of Edward Wortley, an Ambassador Extraordinary to the Court of Turkey, she was able to cross the forbidden borders of the harem. During her visit between 1717 and 1718, she studied the Arabic language but was most interested in the Orientals and their manners of living. Struck by the beauty of Turkish females, she wrote: "Tis surprising to see a young woman that is not very handsome. They have naturally the most beautiful complexions in the world and generally large black eyes" (70). Montagu then described the interior of the Turkish bath with minute detail and the harem of the Grand Vizier after she visited his wife. She saw the black eunuchs guarding the harem. Montagu confirmed that the grace and beauty of the Turkish females surpassed the finest sculptures she had ever seen (86–91).⁴ These descriptions unveiled the most private and seductive of Eastern female life. They invaded the fantasies of the Western public and stimulated further images of the sensuality of the Orient. They inflamed the imagination of several Western painters such as Gérôme, Lewis, Renoir, Matisse, and Lecomte du Nouÿ as well as literary figures such as Flaubert, Nerval, and Lord Byron, whose description of the harem in *Don Juan* is a typical representation of Montagu's. They also fired the imagination of countless armchair-travelers—those who had never set foot on Eastern soil; amongst those and the most representative of them are the French painter Ingres and the British literary men Thomas Moore, Robert Southey, Thomas Hope, and James Morier.⁵ Thus Oriental females of the harem haunted artists and literary men, who sought access, if only in their imaginative works, to their prohibited quarters.

Nineteenth-century artists who tried to invade in anomalous attempts or in their imagination the non-reachable quarters of the harem and seraglio exhibited paintings of Eastern females fully dressed but unveiled or half naked. The armchair-traveler Jeane-Auguste-Dominique Ingres fell under the spell of Lady Montagu's descriptions and painted his *Odalisque et Slave* (1842) and *Le Bain turc*.(date?) Commenting on these paintings, Maryanne Stevens asserts, "The cross-reference between the bather and the odalisque suggests Ingres's desire to Westernize an Oriental theme" (172). In the second painting, Ingres depicts several erotic nude females represented as exotic sex objects jammed in a highly imaginative Oriental bath. Another French painter and actual traveler Jean-Léon Gérôme painted *The Moorish Bath* (c.1870) and *Dance of the*

Almeh (1863). While he was in Cairo in 1868, he made two visits to Eastern baths: one entered through a mysterious door which opened into a large hall of white marble and the other to the private bath of the Persian Ambassador to Egypt. The second painting, which shows a dancing girl with janissaries and musicians in the background, is an actual representation since many visitors to Egyptian cities like Qena, Esna, and Aswan had access to the houses of pleasure. Flaubert visited these three cities in search for sexual pleasure and described the dancing girls and their places in detail (Stevens 141). John Fredrick Lewis, who lived in Cairo in 1841, produced his *An Intercepted Correspondence, Cairo* (1869), one of several paintings exhibiting the harem he had never actually seen. Auguste Renoir painted his *Odalisque* (1867–1870), eleven years before he actually visited Algeria. His work may have also influenced Matisse's *Odalisque in Red Trousers* (1921), which exhibits an Eastern woman with a similar face and poise resemblance of Renoir's painting, but who is half naked. This painting, which is a more conventional picture of the odalisque, was executed nine years after his visit to Morocco in 1906. While in Algiers, Renoir noted that Eastern females were "clever enough to know the value of mystery. An eye half-seen becomes really alluring" (Qtd. Stevens, 18). The exterior section of the harem interested Lecomte du Nouÿ who painted his masterpiece *The Guard of the Seraglio* (1876) four years after his visit to Asia Minor. These paintings printed exotic, mysterious, and erotic images of the Orient—and the erotic and seductive Orient then fell under the infatuated gaze of the West. But these paintings were more the product of the artists' imaginations and fantasies than of their actual observations. A corrective projection of these imaginary images can be seen in the works of contemporary Oriental painters like Osman Hamdi (1842–1910) who presented images of Oriental men and women "dressed in colorful garments in the Oriental fashion and placed in 'authentic' settings—as thinking, questioning, and acting human beings who display none of the passivity and submissiveness attributed to them by European painters" (Çelik, 204).

On the literary level, nineteenth-century writers tinted with their pens what contemporary artists painted with their brushes. Romantic literary figures who had not set foot on Oriental soil projected various perceptions of sexuality in general and of the Oriental female in particular in their works. Jean Hagstrum argues that the Romantics' interest in bodies is a result of their interest in poetry itself: "Intellectual and imaginative

transcendence of a reality like physical love resides in the very make and genius of poetry" (18). Keats, Hagstrum believes, was capable of "terrestrializing, naturalizing, and then poetizing the feelings that arise from the body" (70). Wordsworth "praised the union of sexually differentiated bodies as the great source of mental, including poetic, activity," and Blake creates a "type of active eroticism" when he addresses sexual love (Hagstrum 54 and 111). The interest of the Romantics in bodies, female bodies, and especially female Oriental bodies, is evident in Wordsworth's "The Egyptian Maid," Coleridge's Ethiopian maid in "Kubla Khan," Shelley's sensual Oriental dreamwoman in "Alastor," and especially in Byron's *Don Juan* and the Oriental tales. Wordsworth, who is conscious of the precincts of not literally being in the East, writes a lyrical poem, "The Egyptian Maid," fusing the exoticism of Egypt with the heroism of the medieval times of King Arthur. Although Wordsworth reverses Loti's narrative formula by sending the Egyptian maid to the shores of Arthurian Britain rather than sending the knights of King Arthur to Egypt, his perception of the exotic experience as an adventurous act controlled by Self holds well enough to push Merlin to try to control and destroy the ship of the maid; but Nina, the Lady of the Lake, interferes to rescue the unconscious maid and bring her to Arthur's court. There, Arthur's knights try to satisfy their sensual experience by touching the hand of the Oriental sleeping beauty; however, they are all reproached, except Galahad, who succeeds in winning her heart. Thus, West and East fuse in a sensual, seductive, and exotic experience quite evident in the narrator's highly eroticized description of the unconscious (submissive) maid:

Behold, how wantonly she laves
Her sides, the Wizard's craft confounding;
Like something out of the Ocean sprung
To be for ever fresh and young,
Breasts the sea-flashes and huge the waves
Top-gallant high, rebounding and rebounding!

But Ocean under magic heavens,
And cannot spare the Thing he cherished:
Ah! What avails that she was fair,
Luminous, blithe, and debonair?
The storm has stripped her of her leaves;
The Lily floats no longer! — She hath perished. (ll.43–54).

Wordsworth creates an Oriental female image that “can be controlled, not only by the craft of the Occidental mechanist, [Merlin] but ideologically by the poet-narrator who represses the persona of the maiden and imposes an interpretation upon the image to reconstitute ideologically the Arthurian legends he has more directly, and therefore less malleably, inherited” writes Eric Gidal (9). Here Wordsworth’s narrator applies Loti’s narrative formula of the seductive and erotic as only possible when controllable. Gidal confirms my thesis thus: “Wordsworth appropriates an already appropriated image whose original signification is lost in the passages of time and place for the purpose not of finally understanding the sources of its appearance, but for creating Pagan, Oriental, feminine Other to redefine his own creative self and the spirit and soul of his nation” (10). Consequently, Wordsworth’s creation of the desired and seductive Egyptian maid implies his conscious endeavor to display his own inhibited sensual fantasies and, especially to display that his affairs with Western females—for instance his French mistress—were inhibited. Coleridge, on the other hand, creates in “Kublia Khan” a “pleasure dome” in an Oriental paradise-like setting. The fact that the dome, later destroyed in the dream, is built for *pleasure* suggests the disparaging sensual and erotic fantasies of the dreamer. This is confirmed when the “damsel with a dulcimer,” the Abyssinian maid, appears in a vision singing and playing her instrument so delightfully that the dreamer is enthused to rebuild the dome in his imagination; i.e. to experience the pleasure of the sensual Orient in his mind’s eye. Here, Coleridge’s desire to gaze upon Self to and perceive its mysterious sensual reality seems at its best. Shelley, however, is more emerged in fantasies of the seductive, erotic East than Wordsworth and Coleridge. In his “Alastor,” he creates a poet who, after satisfying his sexual desires with a veiled Oriental maid in a dream, wakes up to start his search in the Orient for his ultimate sensual experience. The narrator of the poem employs the most erotic and sensual images when he describes the veiled maid and the sexual affair:

Her glowing limbs beneath the sinuous veil
 Of woven wind, her outspread arms now bare,
 Her dark locks floating in the breath of night,
 Her beamy bending eyes, her parted lips
 Outstretched, and pale, and quivering eagerly.
 His strong heart sunk and sickened with excess
 Of love. He reared his shuddering limbs and quelled

His gasping breath, and spread his arms to meet
 Her panting bosom: ... she drew back a while,
 Then, yielding to the irresistible joy. (ll.176–185)

The impact of such an erotic Oriental scene on the Western reader is by itself telling. The veiled maid's "bending eyes," her paleness, and her yielding implies if anything her submissiveness to the poet, to the other—if not in reality, then certainly in the imagination. In the same poem Shelley creates another maid, the Arab maiden who brings the poet food from her father's tent and attends to him in his sleep. This maiden's exotic sensuality is exposed when she is described by the narrator as "Enamoured, yet not daring for deep awe / To speak her love: —and watched his [the poet's] nightly sleep, / Sleepless herself, to gaze upon his lips" (ll.133–135). The sensual gaze, here, is an Oriental female gaze; but this sensual gaze is also controlled by the poet-dreamer, who abstains from having sexual relations with the Arab maiden because he is completely obsessed by the Oriental maid of his dreams. Here, Shelley seems to fantasize about an erotic experience that may be controlled in the imagination but not in reality; and if this signifies anything, it signifies Self's inhibited exotic and erotic desires.

However, among the British Romantics, Lord Byron's sexualization of the Orient and Orientals is the most significant as it is based on personal experience and not only on the imagination. Byron's visits to the East are best represented in his correspondence and Oriental tales, which project not only self-inflicted quests for fulfillment and location of Self but also Self criticizing Self. In the East he had the opportunity to satisfy his desires without restraint: "I have outlived all my appetites and most of my vanities aye even the vanity of authorship," writes Byron (*L & J*, II.48). He further confesses, "I had a number of Greek and Turkish women" (*L & J*, II.46), one of whom he celebrated in *The Bride of Abydos*; he fell in love with three Greek beauties, the Marci sisters, and the grandson of Ali Pasha of Albania. His erotic relationships, however, after he visited the Orient, are no match to his scandalous sexual affairs in England, especially with Lady Caroline Lamb. These relationships intensify the dramatic gender-tension in his major works. The Turkish cantos in *Don Juan* project the obsession of the Turkish Sultan in his sexual exploitation of Gulbeyaz, of three other wives, and of fifteen hundred concubines in his harem. To Byron, however, the overpowering sexuality

of the Oriental masculine is not that different from that of the Western; the only difference being that the first is legal while the second is not. The sexuality and brutality of the Western Giaour and Conrad are not better or worse than those of the Eastern Hassan, Seyd Pasha, Selim, and Giaffir Pasha. And although Byron describes the charm, beauty, and seductive appeal of his Eastern heroines in minute detail, his projection of the Oriental female is sometimes raised to the level of spiritual Sufism (as in the cases of Leila and Zuleika, who become iconographic representations of divine beauty) or is lowered to the level of physical consummation (as in the cases of Gulbeyaz, Haidee, and Gulnare who revolt against the masculine Eastern tradition by attempting to secure their sexuality by seduction a Western male). Juan becomes Juanna when disguised in a female dress in the harem; he, in the guise of a she, succumbs to Gulbeyaz's sensual desires. Conrad is freed from the Pasha's prison by Gulnare's obsessive sensual desire. Caroline Frankline argues that the "Turkish cantos [in *Don Juan*] problematize feminism from a masculine viewpoint, by counterpointing the blunt defiance any self-respecting man (Juan) would express if treated as a female concubine with the repulsion he feels for a woman who rejects 'feminine' subservience altogether in making a sexual advance on her own account," (151)⁶. In this respect, isn't Byron feminizing the Occident and masculinizing the Orient? But this image of the phallic Eastern female in Byron's works is not different from that of the Western female. Donna Inez, Juan's mother, and Donna Julia, his lover, are Western images of Gulbeyaz and Gulnare, who assume the role of phallic women. The first tries to secure her masculinity by controlling her husband and the second tries to do so by tempting her lover.

Thus, in *Don Juan* and the Oriental tales, erotic relationships generate a locus for criticism of Self as well as of Other, and to a certain extent, Self more than the Other. In short, I believe that sexuality in *Don Juan*, *The Giaour*, *The Bride of Abydos*, and *The Corsair* is based partially on Pierre Loti's narrative formula, whereby "a European visits a non-European country, and a man has an erotic relation with a woman," and partially on Plato's and Aristophanes' definitions of *eros* as "a search for wholeness," or "an act of mental recovery," which "evinces this desire for self-improvement" (Cross 2–3). Images of sexuality in Byron's works, then, generate dramatic tensions between Self, and Self and Self and Other. And when this Other happens to be no other than the Oriental Other, male or

female, dramatic tensions intensify and culminate in images of sexuality demeaning Self more than Other. In this respect, "Byron has played a mirror trick on his English readers.... [What] Byron is critiquing is really 'us,'" confirms David Waterman (38). "Although Byron frequently portrays the Orient as exotic 'Other,'" Alan Richardson argues, "he seems elsewhere aware of an Orient functioning as what Raymond Schwab calls the 'alter-ego to the Occident,' posing 'the great question of the Different' to a European culture in crisis" (183).

French Romantics were as interested in sexuality as their British counterparts. For instance, Gérard de Nerval described his own attitude towards the Eastern woman saying: "Does one not dream of adventure and mysteries at the sight of these tall houses, these latticed windows, where so often one sees the sparkle of the inquiring eyes of young girls?" (Qtd. Stevens 18 and 23). Here he reverses the traditional claim that males see and females are "to-be-seen." In his *Voyages en Orient* he sees an Egyptian beauty in Zaynab with whom he had a liaison, an Orient fully saturated with female seduction and sexuality.⁷ To him the pilgrimage to the Orient represented a kind of quest for self-fulfillment. Gustave Flaubert, on the other hand, had an erotic reverie of the Orient. He finds "la femme orientale est une machine, et rien de plus; elle ne fait aucune différence entre un homme et autre homme.... C'est nous qui pensons à elle, mais elle ne pense guère à nous," ("The Oriental woman is a machine, and nothing more; she doesn't differentiate between one man and another.... We are thinking of her, but she is hardly thinking of us") (Qtd. Lowe 75). The passivity and compliance of the Oriental female are quite obvious, which dehumanizes the Oriental woman, Lowe believes, and renders her machine-like nature an occasion for sexual exploitation and pleasure (76).⁸ Flaubert's sensual relationship with Kuchuk Hânem, a well-known Egyptian *almeh*, dancer and prostitute, was devoid of any feeling because "she generates sexual pleasure, yet she is impassive, undemanding, and insensate herself; her oriental mystery never fails to charm, her resources are never exhausted" (Lowe 76). But aren't all prostitutes, Western and Eastern, passive and submissive enough to satisfy the fetish of their clients? And isn't it true that women's sensuality throughout history and up till our times has always been dominated by males? Catherine Macaulay, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Shelley had frequently compared the situation of nineteenth-century British women to that of the harem slaves (See Richardson 177–178). Thus, Flaubert's affairs with an Oriental

prostitute should not categorize all Oriental females. Lowe argues that "Flaubert's oriental woman is an anti-figure that articulates by negation a profile of desired traits for nineteenth-century French bourgeois community; as she is insensate, vulgar, and licentious, they are sensitive, bourgeois, and discreet" (78). This image of Oriental woman prevails in his *Correspondance, Voyage en Orient* (1849–1852), and in his novel, *Salammbô* (1862). The ancient city of Carthage, the setting of Flaubert's novel, and Salammbô are representative of the sexually desired but inaccessible Orient, which is also the battlefield of cruel and sadistic wars between the Carthaginians and the Barbarians who are incapable of accepting the otherness of the Other. While Said finds Flaubert's representations of the Orient occasions for feminizing and abusing the East, Lowe adopts Terdiman's belief that Flaubert's "attempt to escape from bourgeois society and to find a position from which to criticize French society; the appearance of the Orient in his work is thus one representation of cultural self-criticism, of an anti-bourgeois position" (See Said 188–190 and Lowe 93). In this respect, Flaubert meets Lord Byron, whose Oriental pilgrimages and works offered him remarkable opportunities to criticize British hypocrisy and cant.

Finally, I must confirm that what Alan Richardson believes forms the basis of Byron's image of the Orient applies to most if not all nineteenth-century artists' and literary figures' projection of the seductive, erotic East. No doubt the physiology of the Oriental female, the secretive manner of her life, her submissiveness, her passivity, and even her assuming the role of a phallic female, excited the Western sense of the exotic, seductive, sensual, and erotic Orient. Actual artists-travelers to the East applied Pierre Loti's narrative formula of the exotic and erotic in actuality *and* in their creative works; those who never set foot on Eastern soil, entertained the Oriental sensual images in their imagination. The representations of both groups, however, in Western art and literature mirrored the Western Self's infatuation with sexuality. Images of the sensual Orient in Western works dealing with the Eastern matter became indispensable elements of exotic produce, of seductive glamour, and of sensual charm; but this sensual Western gaze invigorated Self's reflexive moments of inner contemplation. Besides, the representations of some Western artists of the lustful and cruel sheiks and their protective eunuchs at the door of the seraglios served to highlight the obsession of the Western males in sexual fetish. Western fantasies and desires were dominant factors that contributed to the femininization of the East and consequently to its

sexualization; and, if the sexualization of the Orient tells a little about some private aspects of Oriental life, it tells a lot more about the veiled fantasies of nineteenth-century Europe.

Notes

1. The real name of Pierre Loti is Louis Marie Julian Viaud. He was not a writer by profession but a naval officer in France from 1867 to 1900. His travel experiences constitute most if not all what he wrote about, all the reason why his narrative works are half romances, half autobiographies.

2. Jean Antoine Galland, translated the Arabian tales, *Alf Laila wa Laila*, into French. His *Les Mille et un Nuit* was immediately translated into English as the *Arabian Nights* and ran through at least thirty editions in English and French during the eighteenth century. For a brief discussion of the translation and reception of the *Arabian Nights* 'Entertainment, see Naji Oueijan's *The Progress of an Image: The East in English Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996). 42–44; for a full discussion see, Muhsin Jassim Ali's *Scheherazade in England: A Study of Nineteenth-century English Criticism of the Arabian Nights* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1981).

3. Other Oriental tales were published by Orientalists like Rev. James Ridley, *Tales of the Genii* (1764); Alexander Dow, *Tales of Inatulla* (1768); both scholars were servants of the East India Company; Robert Bage, *The Fair Syrian* (1787); and a translation from French, *The Beautiful Turk* (1720).

4. Unlike Lady Montagu, Lady Elizabeth Carven, who visited Turkey and had access to the harem and bath, was more like a spectator than a participant; her projection of the Turkish female is unenthusiastic and less favorable; for an interesting discussion see Katherine S. H. Turner's "From Classical to Imperial: Changing Visions of Turkey in the Eighteenth Century," in *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit*. Ed. Steve Clark (London: Zed Books, 1999). 113–128.

5. See for instance Ingres's *Odalisque and Slave* (1842), Southey's *Thalaba*, Moore's *Lalla Rookh*, Hope's *Anaslasius*, and Mcrier's *Hajji Baba*.

6. A tremendous number of seminal works appeared on Byron's Orientalism and Oriental tales. See for instance: Doris Langley Moore's "Byron's Sexual Ambivalence," Appendix 2, in *Lord Byron: Accounts Rendered* (London: John Murray, 1974): 437–456; Suzan Wolfson's "Their she Condition: Cross-dressing and the Politics of Gender in Don Juan," in *ELH* 54:3 (Fall 1987): 585–617; Marlon Ross's "Romantic Quest and Conquest: Troping Masculine Power in the Crisis of Poetic Identity," in *Romanticism and Feminism*. Ed. Anne Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988): 26–51; Sonia Hofson's "The Writer's Ravishment: Women and Romantic Author-the Example of Byron," in *Romanticism and Feminism*, 93–114; Marilyn Butler's "The Orientalism of Byron's Giaour," in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*. Ed. Bernard Beatty and Vincent

Newey (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1988): 78-96; Malcolm Kelsall's "Byron and the Woman of the Harem," in *Rereading Byron: Essays Selected from Hofstra University's Byron Bicentennial Conference*. Ed. Alice Levine and Robert N. Keane (New York: Garland, 1993): 165-173; Jerome Christensen's "Perversion, Parody, and Cultural Hegemony: Lord Byron's Oriental Tales," in *SAQ* 88:3 (Summer 1989): 569-603; Naji Oueijan's "Byron's Eastern Literary Portraits" in *Byron and the Mediterranean World*. Ed. Marius Byron Raiziz (Athens: The Hellenic Byron Society, 1995): 93-103; and Naji Oueijan's "Byron's Eastern *Bride*," *Byron as Reader*. Ed. Petra Bridzum and Frank Erik Pointer (Essen: Die Blaue Eule, 2000): 100-108.

7. See Gérard de Nerval's *Voyages en Orient* (Paris, 1951)

8. Lowe makes an illuminating discussion of Flaubert's images of the seductive Orient in her *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalists*. 75-101.

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